

Statement of Pat Virden
Committee on Government Reform Briefing on
Implementation of the Medicare Drug Benefit
January 20, 2006

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Committee, my name is Pat Virden and I am here today to testify about my experience in trying to choose a prescription drug plan.

I am 72 years old and I take three prescription drugs. One is to lower my cholesterol and two are for an under active thyroid, both very common conditions. As of today, to the best of my knowledge, I am in excellent health. Obviously, that may not continue indefinitely and I wanted to be as informed as possible about my options. My drug bill normally runs about \$150.00 per month.

To tell you just a bit about my background, I am a registered nurse. I worked as a nurse clinician in oncology at George Washington University Hospital Home Care Program for over 20 years, at the Hospice of Northern Virginia for 12 years and at the Washington Home Hospice for 12 years. From that many years as a practicing nurse, I know that I have a formidable knowledge of drugs, bureaucracy and have confronted mountains of complicated paperwork in my day. If ANYBODY should be able to make a wise decision about a prescription drug plan, it is I.

However, the reality turned out to be a very different case! I was completely confounded by and unprepared for the multiplicity of plans, varieties of benefits, restrictions, co-payments, windows, "do-nuts" and conflicting information. Nowhere could I get any assurance that, once having joined a plan to get a specific drug covered, the company could not summarily decide not to provide that drug from their formulary.

Eventually, I just threw up my hands in despair, anger and frustration and began to buy my drugs from Canada. The cost was about 2/3 what I paid for them in America. I did continue to try to inform myself about the Medicare drug options. As luck would have it (and "luck" is truly the operative word!) I finally found a person to help me who was both knowledgeable and familiar with all the plans.

In the end, by the time I factored in the monthly payments, deductibles etc. the Medicare prescription drug plan offered me no greater benefits than buying my drugs from Canada. That is what I will continue to do.

In summation, my personal experience with this has been that it is incomprehensible, too complicated, too many options and, worst, undependable. For example, if a person developed a problem that required a particular pain medication that his drug plan decided not to carry and a generic was not acceptable. I never got a definite answer to that question either.

One additional thing, I often wonder if it is this difficult for me with my hard won familiarity with convoluted paperwork, how much more daunting it must be for people not used to confronting such a jigsaw puzzle.

Thank you for your time and I will be happy to answer any questions.